

Proper 25A Trinity Cathedral (Matthew 22:34-46) Jesus loved to play theological word games with Pharisees! Often this would happen as a result of the Pharisees asking Jesus a question (usually intended to trip him up, like when they asked him – in last week’s Gospel -- whether they should pay taxes to Caesar or not!). But in this morning’s Gospel, Jesus actually bates **them** with a question!

“**So**, he asks, “Who is this Messiah you say you’re waiting for? Whose son will he be?”

“The son of David” (of **course**, you **simpleton!**) they seem to reply.

“But how then can David in Psalm 110 say, ‘The LORD said to **my Lord** (the coming Messiah), Sit at my right hand...’ The writer, David, wouldn’t call one of his sons ‘Lord’, would he? That would be against all the customs of our people! Better think again on that!”

And I love the way Matthew closes this little clashing of foils: “No one was able to give him an answer, nor **from that day** did anyone **dare** to ask him any more questions.” No, I guess not!

Now Jesus knew that the Messiah was to be a descendent of King David. At least that was **one** of the views of the coming Messiah. But he was also sick unto death of the Pharisees’ obsession with purity laws and cleanliness and having the right family tree: Respecting people because of their lineage, not because of their being created in the image of God.

The Pharisees loved to parse the Scriptures and prove to everybody that they, and **only** they, knew the correct interpretation; that is, what God **really** intended. So Jesus shows them the truth of what many of us know today: You can prove anything you want out of Scripture, provided you pick and choose the proof texts which will buttress your own position!

Jesus wanted to show the Pharisees (and us!) that you can get so lost in dogmatic and doctrinal niceties that you lose the very simple and basic message of the Scriptures themselves. Instead of getting sucked into an argument about taxation and just who ought to pay what to whom, Jesus just says “Render unto Caesar the

things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's!" And then he lets us decide what the implications of that might be.

And today, when they ask him (in the first part of our Gospel reading) which commandment is the greatest, he astounds them all by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment, and a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets!"

First of all, like many of the prophets before him, Jesus pretty well ignores the vast majority of the 613 laws and commandments scholars have identified in the Hebrew Bible in favor of the 10 Commandments, Decalogue, the Ten Words.... And then he even "simplifies" them into two – love God, love your neighbor. That's a perfect "summary of the law" because the first four of the 10 Commandments have to do with loving God, and the last six have to do with loving one's neighbor. If you love God, you'll keep the first four; if you love your neighbor, you'll keep the last six!

So Jesus draws from the rich tradition of the Hebrew Bible, but he does it in such a way that the few simple verses he cobbles together truly and accurately summarize what the whole Bible is trying to say! The whole history of Israel tells the story of a people struggling to love their God... and gradually realizing, over many centuries, that that also meant loving their neighbor. The first part of the Old Testament describes their up-and-down attempts to be loving and faithful to God; the later Prophets begin to challenge them to show that love by loving their neighbors (which turns out to be -- **all people!**)

The Summary of the Law – so familiar to us Anglicans from the Prayer Book liturgy – is, of course, simple to remember; not so easy to carry out! So many things compete with our loving God and therefore putting God first in our lives these days. But, loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind means that God has to be considered, indeed put first, in everything we do.

We need to think about God in our business dealings. We need to think about God in our relationships and family life. We need to think about God in our politics! We have separation of church and state in this country, but there really is no separation between religion and politics, between our faith and how we live our public lives together. And that leads us to consider just how we might love our neighbor as ourselves.

Here we have to distinguish between what we might call “goals” and “strategies.” Christians may disagree about how to do tax reform, for example, but we should not disagree that everyone should pay their fair share for the common good. Christians may disagree about how much humankind is to blame for climate change, but we should not disagree that we should all do what we can to protect the planet, God’s good creation.

Christians may disagree about the scope of the Second Amendment to our Constitution, but surely we can agree that something must be done to curb the scourge of gun violence in our land. Christians may disagree about how to fix a broken immigration system, but we should not disagree that we are called to welcome the stranger and the sojourner and to protect refugees fleeing violence and death in the lands of their birth. We can disagree on the strategies. But not on the goals!

The goals are to love God...and our neighbors as ourselves. We can thank Jesus for “simplifying” the law and the prophets for us. But we will still spend our lifetimes learning specific ways to love our God and love our neighbor. It’s simple... but not easy. After all, it’s much easier to argue about who is “orthodox” or “politically correct” and who is not, than truly to get on with the business of loving our neighbors as ourselves!